

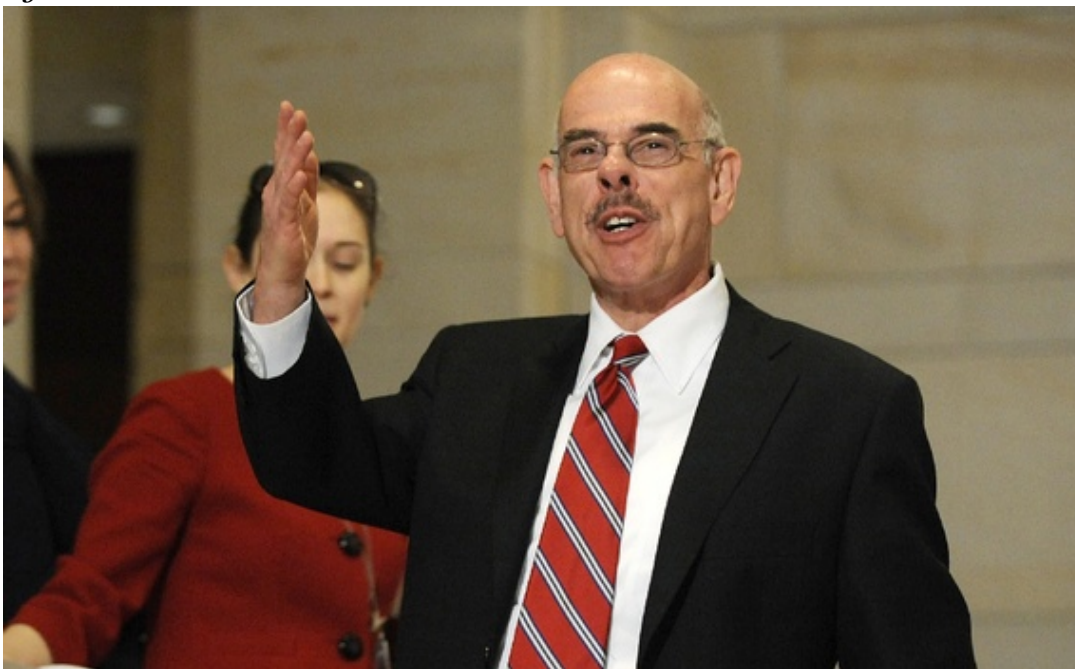


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Henry Waxman's Retirement: A Bad Sign for House Democrats in 2014

By David A. Graham



Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

This morning, *Politico*'s Alex Isenstadt [reported](#) that Democrats are thinking of giving up on recapturing the House of Representatives in the 2014 midterm elections, focusing instead on defending their advantage in the Senate. Better to pool resources and hold on to one chamber, the Bismarckian thinking goes, than launch a two-front war and lose both. Especially when the [prospects for a House takeover are so slim](#), it seems unwise to risk two years where President Obama is a lame duck.

Naturally, Democratic spokesmen [are pushing back](#) on the idea that they're folding their hand, insisting they're in it to win it, etc. But today's [announcement](#) that Henry Waxman, the long-serving, staunchly liberal representative from California, intends to retire after 20 terms lends Isenstadt's report credence: If Waxman thought Democrats were on the verge of winning back the House, he wouldn't be retiring now. (In fact, [as David Freddoso notes](#), Waxman wrote a blog post about why he was planning to run again in early December.)

Waxman has never been shy about trying to grasp chances at power. He has been a congressional crusader on health issues and climate change. In 2009, he broke protocol and challenged John Dingell—

long the senior Democrat on the House Energy and Commerce Committee—for the chair's gavel, because Dingell was seen as soft on environmental issues. Waxman won on a 137-122 vote, though many of his colleagues tut-tutted the maneuver. But Waxman showed why he was in a hurry within months, [shepherding a cap-and-trade bill](#) through the House in June. The bill later died in the Senate.

That defeat was somewhat unusual for Waxman, a hard-charger with a [remarkable history of legislative wins](#) on everything from lead paint to environmental protection to vaccines, often in unfavorable environments for progressive legislation.

It shouldn't be too tough for Democrats to hold Waxman's district, which includes Beverly Hills. His [Mustache of Justice](#), however, is irreplaceable.

He's the seventh Democrat to announce his retirement this year; actually, more Republicans, 10, than Dems have [announced plans to retire](#). But retirements like Waxman and Representative George Miller, another stalwart California liberal, would seem to tell us more about what members of Congress are thinking. (Over at *National Journal*, Josh Kraushaar [speculates](#) that Nancy Pelosi herself could be next.) Waxman is also one of the last of the "Watergate Babies," Democrats elected in 1974 in the wake of Richard Nixon's scandal. With his retirement, only Senator Patrick Leahy and Representative Rick Nolan—who was out of office between 1981 and 2013—will remain.

In 2011, Joshua Green—who co-wrote a book with Waxman—wrote in this space about how the congressman [was an early hero of the fight against AIDS](#):

In 1988, the first year a law seemed feasible, Sen. Jesse Helms, placed a hold on the bill until the confidentiality provisions were stripped. He claimed they constituted special "gay rights." This ultimately scotched the effort. But the following year Waxman and his allies succeeded, aided by the public attention surrounding Ryan White, a teenager from Kokomo, Indiana, who had contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion and became a national spokesman for the disease. This allowed the bill's sponsors to include research funding for pediatric AIDS. The last obstacle was Sen. Dan Coats, the Indiana Republican. Legend has it that Kennedy won Coats's support by renaming the legislation the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resource Emergency (CARE) Act. Realizing it would be unconscionable (and politically perilous) to vote against landmark legislation named for a young constituent, Coats eventually gave his support, and President George H.W. Bush signed it into law in 1990, four months after Ryan White died.

Today, the Ryan White CARE Act provides assistance for hundreds of thousands of low-income and uninsured people with HIV and AIDS. Among other things, it stands as a bipartisan reminder that Congress can be a powerful force for good, that a lot of important things happen in Washington that don't make the headlines, and that not every congressman is a shallow idiot obsessed with texting pictures of his genitals. These days, that can be awfully hard to believe. But it's true.

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